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Competence and Elementary School Achievement:

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Competence and Elementary School Achievement: Case Studies in an Urban Ghetto[1]

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Two Fifth Grade Schoolboys - An Introduction

Leroy is a short, slightly built 10-year-old in blue jeans and a sweat shirt, with a light-to-medium brown complexion, and prominent buck teeth which appear with his ready smile. He lives in a six-room rented flat with his mother and father, an 8-year old brother, two sisters, 6 and 4, and two teen-age half-siblings from mother's first marriage. His father, after whom he is named (i.e., he is a "junior") works steadily for a trucking company on the loading docks, but indulges excessively in alcohol. His mother has worked from time to time as a cleaning lady in a hotel.

Leroy attends a de-facto segregated public school in Chicago's West Side Negro ghetto. He scores a full scale IQ on the WISC of 100, with 100 also on both performance and verbal scores. He is quite spontaneous in his use of speech, although his syntax and dialect are perhaps below average for his peer group. His ability is average in both auditory and visual perceptual tasks.

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He is extremely well organized in his approach to tasks. His motivation for academic achievement is quite high, as evidenced by his performance on TAT sentence completion and achievement-related puppet play sequences. He shows considerable initiative. He derives satisfaction from external rewards for achievement, as well as being motivated for reasons of pleasing himself. His standards of performance for himself are high, and he aspires to being a boss or a leader of men. He has clear notions of sex role differentiation, and identifies positively with his father, more through envy of him than through competition with him. Leroy has great capacity for relationships with people and things. He is spontaneous, comfortable, friendly and giving. He portrays his mother as being nurturant but non-dominant, and his father as competent and dominant in relationship to the mother. He has a mature response to frustrating situations, being able to delay gratification and control impulse. He has satisfactorily dealt with early dependency issues and problems relating to control, and he is also able to handle aggressive feelings and oedipal material with considerable comfort. His present level of adaptation to life is rated as excellent regarding home, school, and neighborhood functioning.

Calvin is a tall, moderately obese 10-year-old with chocolate complexion who wears glasses intermittently and who appears lethargic and slow-moving, except for an occasional spark of enthusiasm. He lives in a rented 5 room apartment with his mother and father, one younger brother, age 9, and two older half-sisters from a previous marriage of his father. His mother is an obese woman who keeps a very neat household. His father works steadily as a paint mixer in a factory.

Calvin is a classmate of Leroy's. He scores a full IQ of 98 on the WISC, with a verbal score of 87 and a performance score of 110. He speaks in a low voice and tends to swallow his words. He does not communicate much by gesture

or facial expression. He scores below average for his school on visual and auditory discrimination and memory tasks. On tasks which he perceives as being easy, he does rather well, with good organization. His low tolerance for frustration, and his fear of failure, lead to easy discouragement and an inability to proceed on tasks of greater difficulty. He appears to have little drive. He appears fairly responsive to external approval, but does not know how to elicit this. He does not appear motivated by internal sources, although he is able to speak about academic achievement as having value. He projects a low sense of self-esteem and a low sense of competence. He relates in a compliant, yet somewhat distant manner and his lack of spontaneity and warmth interfere with his relationship to people. His mother is portrayed by him as being mainly concerned with housework, and although he portrays his father in positive, competent terms, there appears to be a minimal level of relationship between father and son.

Calvin is an academic underachiever. He is low in initiative and does not persist in tasks that are difficult for him. Fear of failure inhibits his performance. He is low in curiosity. He is not able to follow through in a goal-directed fashion in pursuit of objectives, although he verbalizes means-to-ends concepts. He has minimal zest for life, and could be said to be mildy to moderately depressed. He has difficulty expressing other kinds of affects, especially anger. His present level of adaptation to life is rated as being fairly good at home, fair in the neighborhood, and at school his achievement level is poor while his conduct is good.

Description of the Study

Leroy and Calvin are two children from an inner city all-Negro school, who together with their parents, participated in a study of the personality and family determinants of academic achievement and underachievement at grade

five. The children were examined by both a child psychiatrist and clinical psychologist, each of whom observed them individually for three separate one-hour sessions. The clinicians were not aware of the achievement status of the individual children. A social anthropologist carried out extensive interviews with parents and observations in the homes focusing primarily on the parents' thought systems about child-rearing and achievement. A team of social psychologists observed the subjects' classroom behaviors and studied the interaction of the parents and the child in structured achievement situations in the childrens' own homes. Some results of these latter investigations have been reported elsewhere (6), and others will become available soon (5).

This paper will present some of the psychiatric and psychological findings from the group of 23 intensively studied youngsters (7 pilot and 16 main study) who were approximately equally divided among males and females; achievers and underachievers. All of the children attend the same public elementary school, and live in the same segregated lower class Negro neighborhood, which falls at or slightly above the mean for Chicago's inner city on most demographic criteria for socioeconomic status. Thus it could reasonably be expected that the subject children would have experienced similar status deprivation and external environmental disadvantage. The main sample was selected to include only those children having a total Lorge-Thorndike IQ at or above the mean for the fifth grade in this school (mean IQ was 87). Only those youngsters who at the time were living in a two-parent household were included in the study. All the children in the sample were living with both natural parents, or with the natural mother and step-father, except for one who had lived with foster parents since birth. Since IQ and family circumstances were controlled as described previously, differences observed in academic achievement levels as measured by school grades and standardized achievement tests could then reasonably be

expected to reflect variation in individual characteristics of the children, and/or variation in their family experiences of a more subtle nature than merely the fact of the presence of two parents in the home.

Some of the specific aims of the clinical study were (1) to explore in some depth the spectrum of personality dimensions to be found in a group of inner city Negro children, (2) to relate the observed personality characteristics to the level of academic performance at fifth grade, (3) to compare achievers and underachievers of both sexes from within the Negro lower class group, using the child's peers as a reference group, rather than comparing him (as one sees so frequently in the literature) to his white middle class agemates.

The method of clinical observation will be described briefly. The psychiatrist saw the children in a moderately structured first session focused on the use of a number of toys of interest to children of this age. This was followed by a puppet play session in which the child was requested to play-act by himself "something that happens in families", subsequent to which the child played the children and the examiner played the parents in a Sunday afternoon scene, this being followed by the child playing the parents and the examiner playing the children in an academic achievement situation in which the children have homework to do, but prefer to go out to play. The third and last psychiatric session was an open-ended diagnostic interview covering the child's relationships to important persons in his life, his interests, his concerns, his aspirations and general life adjustment.

The psychologist utilized a battery of instruments consisting of the WISC, TAT, Sentence Completion, the Rosenzweig Picture Frustration Test, tests of visual and auditory perception, and tests for impulse control.

RESULTS

The clinical observations were rated under the general headings of Physical Characteristics, General Intelligence, Cognitive Development, Language Development, Motivation, Self-concepts, Interpersonal Relationships, Emotional Freedom to Learn, Academic-achievement Related Skills, and General Life Adjustment.

Limitations of time permit the presentation of only these findings which allow for generalization across groups of achievers and underachievers of both sexes. We are planning to provide a detailed case-by-case analysis of the material in a forthcoming longer communication, but for the purposes of the brief presentation this afternoon the following findings will be presented:

Gross physical impressions suggested that achievers of both sexes had a more solid and substantial look about them, and were more alert. The underachievers presented a more diffuse appearance. The girl achievers were better groomed than the girl underachievers, but grooming per se did not differentiate the two groups of boys.

Both boy and girl achievers score considerably higher than underachievers on the verbal and the non-verbal portions of the WISC. For the boys there was a greater discrepancy between achievers and underachievers in verbal skills (107 to 88) than in non-verbal skills (101 to 93). The opposite was true for the girls, where non-verbal skills (113 to 86) showed a greater discrepancy than did verbal skills (100 to 88). With one exception, the underachievers impressed the psychologist as functioning considerably below their intellectual potential; one could sense capability, despite the limited output. Several of the achievers, on the other hand, appeared to be functioning optimally.

Language development as evidenced by quality of speech and syntax did not particularly differentiate achievers from underachievers. The achieving boys

tended to have the best speech of the entire group, but quality of speech was not nearly so outstanding as was their ability to utilize language as a tool in problem solving.

Cognitive development as manifested in visual perception, auditory discrimination, awareness of time and space and understanding of logical relationships did not particularly discriminate achievers from underachievers. Achievers were, however, better organized in their approach to learning tasks.

Achievers of both sexes are clearly better motivated for academic success than are their underachieving classmates. The achieving boys derive greatest satisfaction from reaching internalized goals, although they are also responsive to external rewards. The achieving girls appear to be more highly motivated by external approval than by satisfaction of internal goals. These motivational factors seemed closely tied to the children's concepts of self.

Self-concept could be considered to have two components (1) definition or structure, and (2) evaluation or worth. The achievers have solid self-definition as well as positive self-evaluation. The underachievers appear to be deficient in self-definition, but the self-definition present tends to be tinged with negative evaluation of the self.

Capacity for interpersonal relationships as evidenced by the behavior with the male psychiatrist and the female psychologist indicated striking differences in favor of the achievers. The achievers showed a higher degree of comfort in the one to one situation, and a greater capacity for closeness and warmth. Conversely, they were capable of eliciting a greater degree of involvement from the examiners. They were able to build on the relationship from one session to the next. With the underachievers there was little sense of carry-over from

one meeting to another. The achievers also gave evidence of intense relationships with caretaking figures who define them as "special", and who are likely to be more consistent and supportive than the caretakers of underachievers. For many of the achievers of both sexes, there was evidence of a solid relationship with a father or other adult male viewed as competent by the child. Underachieving boys demonstrated greater dependency on relatively more dominant mothers than was the case with their achieving counterparts. Achieving boys identified with fathers whom they portrayed as competent, and achieving girls with competent (usually professional) women outside of the family. Underachievers of both sexes identified with parents of the same sex who were less often portrayed as competent, and with whom the child appeared to have tenuous, ill-defined, or hostile relationships.

Achievers of both sexes demonstrated a greater capacity for individual initiative, the setting of reasonable goals, and the capacity for following through to completion. Fear of failure often stimulated achievers to greater effort while it immobilized the underachievers.

Generally speaking, it may be stated that achievers of both sexes were more adequate in most areas of ego functioning and scored higher on a scale of overall mental health.

DISCUSSION

The conclusions which may be drawn from a study of this kind are limited by the degree to which one can justifiably generalize from a small sample of children to the larger population of lower class Negro elementary school children in Northern cities. We are limited by the contingencies of our methodology, e.g., seeing the children in a school building, the examiners being Caucasian,

and the fact that all of the children have been defined as achievers or underachievers for some years prior to their inclusion in this study, which opens the question relative to the "cause" or "effect" nature of the personality factors being described.

We set out in this study to observe achieving and underachieving fifth grade Negro children on a number of variables related to academic achievement. Our original hypotheses focussed mainly on factors which could roughly be subsumed under the heading of motivation, where we were interested in observing achievement themes in TAT, sentence completion, and puppet play stories, and attitudes toward achievement on the part of children and their parents as they emerged during our contacts. Our original intention in including measures of cognitive and language functioning was to control to some degree for these factors in an effort to highlight the range of variation in the motivational area.

However, after the interviews were completed, and we began to analyze the findings, we discovered that the factors which led to our correct identification of the achievers and underachievers were not the structured motivational categories which we had initially conceived. Rather, the factors with the greatest potency for distinguishing between achievers and underachievers were the clinical impressions of the psychiatrist and psychologist regarding the quality of the interpersonal relationships and the level of self-concepts observed in the children. It is interesting that the clinicians were unable to retain clear images of the underachievers for more than a short time after terminating the examinations, whereas in the case of the achievers recall of the interaction with the children was more complete and required less frequent reference to the interview protocols. In addition, in the puppet play

situations presenting achievement themes, more outstanding than the setting of goals, stated aspirations, and other motivational indicators which appeared in the stories, was the style and intensity of the parent-child exchange as dramatized by the subjects. The material of the third psychiatric interview, in which the children were encouraged to talk about significant relationships, strongly supported the impression that achievers had experienced more intense, satisfying, and predictable relationships with family members.

Two children orginally identified as underachievers manifested good interpersonal relationships with the examiners and well-differentiated self-concepts; however, their self-evaluation was predominantly negative. The remainder of the underachievers manifested poor to fair interpersonal relationships, and a more diffuse self-concept.

These observations have led us to conclude that elementary school achievement under these defined social conditions (and probably others) is strongly associated with (1) the capacity for solid interpersonal relationships and (2) the presence of a clearly defined sense of self, which for the most part is evaluated positively. Underachievement, in this view, results from a lack of one or the other of these two necessary conditions.

It will be noted that in the above we have chosen to avoid discussion of the role of cognitive and language factors in the etiology of underachievement. These two clusters of factors have received wide emphasis in much of the literature on education for the disadvantaged. (1,3,4) This is perhaps the case because there are no studies in the literature, to our knowledge, where personality factors and cognitive factors were observed simultaneously, as was the case in this study. It is true that in our study there were differences between the groups of achievers and underachievers on cognitive dimensions. However, we

believe that the differences in interpersonal relationships and self concepts were more impressive in their ability to discriminate groups.

This, of course, does not help settle the complex question of the ultimate etiology of academic achievement or underachievement among these children. A cross-sectional study at age 10 or 11 cannot hope to do this. The issue of the developmental primacy of object relationships versus cognitive development (if indeed they can be separated) has been the subject of endless debate, is beyond the scope of this work, and must be left to future careful longitudinal study.

We are left, however, with a set of intriguing observations about achievers and underachievers, and a social milieu crying out for "answers" to the problem of the disadvantaged. Do our observations have some practical application to the present crisis in education?

Practical Implications

Our group at the Institute for Juvenile Research has been concerned, both at the elementary and preschool levels, with the devising of appropriate educational prescriptions for socially disadvantaged children. It is relatively easy to plan enrichment programs for youngsters who fall into our achiever category, since they are able to make use of the stimuli presented to them, largely perhaps because they are accessible to the efforts of adults who focus their attention on program materials, goals, etc. On the other hand, intervention with the underachieving group, who compose a significant proportion of children currently in our public schools, is a more challenging and more frustrating circumstance.

Indeed, educational programs for the disadvantaged under the Economic Opportunity Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have hitherto successfully reached predominantly that segment of the disadvantaged group

having the kinds of interpersonal strengths which are described as being characteristic of our achieving group. This has been detailed in a recent paper by one of the authors (2). In short, in order to avail oneself of the additional life experience provided by these programs, which can contribute to individual growth and motivation, one must be capable of establishing meaningful relationships to others, and must feel a sense of personal worth that is communicated to others. There must also be sufficient discipline of oneself and reasonable expectations about the trustworthiness of others to make maximal use of programs that demand committments of specific blocks of one's time and active involvement with people.

It is precisely in this area that we see a challenge existing for the mental health professional. The underachievers in the school setting are often "unreachable" largely because of poor capacities for interpersonal relationships. Under these circumstances no matter how enriched the curriculum and how much money is spent on programing, children of this type are likely to be left behind in not only the academic situation, but in ultimate life outcome as well. Resolution of this societal problem will ultimately rest on the devising of more appropriate techniques to "reach" these children. Simultaneously, we must work vigorously from a primary preventive model to attempt to develop methods to influence early development through intensive work with families.

SUMMARY

This paper has presented some of the major conclusions arising out of a clinical study of a group of fifth grade achievers and underachievers from an urban lower class Negro public elementary school. The major factors which distinguished the group of achievers from the grcup of underachievers were those in the area of quality of interpersonal relationships, clarity of self-definition, and positive self-evaluation.

The heterogeneity of this group of children, all of whom are often glibly referred to as "disadvantaged", suggests the need for greater precision in the definition of various aspects of social disadvantage as they relate to the development of personality.

Also consideration of these personality dimensions becomes important in War on Poverty programs, since the characteristics of our achieving group seem to be necessarily present in order for maximal benefit to be derived from enrichment programs.

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